

# The Eldership: A Noble Task

## Introduction

The eldership is described as a "noble task." It is one of the most important roles in the church, yet is also one of the least well understood. The intent of this paper is to examine the biblical evidence concerning this role and to consider how this might relate to the church today.

The basis of this study is the passages that discuss the eldership in the New Testament. Because of the relatively limited amount of information concerning the topic in the New Testament, we must try to understand this evidence and then use it to "paint a picture" of the eldership that is consistent with this evidence.

## Three Names, One Job: The Office of the Eldership

The New Testament uses three unique terms to describe those that comprise the eldership. They are "elder" (Greek *presbuteros*), "shepherd" (Greek *poimeen*), and "overseer" (Greek *episkopos*).

Other English terms can be related to these basic terms. "Presbyter" is a transliteration of the term for elder. The term for "shepherd" has been translated as "pastor." Similarly, the term translated "overseer" has been translated "bishop."

Importantly, these terms or their cognates are used interchangeably in Acts 20:17, 28 and 1 Peter 5:1-3. This shows that the three terms were used to describe one individual office or role in the early church. Recognizing the most commonly used term, this paper will use the term "elder" to refer to ones filling this office.

Whenever elders existed in the apostolic church, they served as a body in a plurality. This is seen in Jerusalem, Ephesus and Philippi. Also, elders were to be appointed in each town of Crete. The writer of 2 John and 3 John also refers to himself as an elder, but there is no internal evidence to indicate with which congregation he may have had an affiliation.

## The Work and Duties of the Eldership

From the meaning of the words used to describe elders, there are three primary aspects of the work. The "elder" aspect of the office suggests maturity similar to the patriarchal leaders of the Jews. Elders would possess the experience, wisdom and maturity to guide the church. The "overseer" aspect of the office suggests management and supervision of the church. The "shepherd" aspect of the office suggests direct or "hands-on" personal care for the flock of the church. This involves gentle care for the flock as a whole as well as attention to the individual "sheep" (members of the church) as needed.

Being a position of leadership within the church, members of the eldership perform similar functions as other leaders within the church. Yet, because of the special role they serve, there are also some unique functions they perform. It is beneficial to consider these functions in this way.

## **Duties Shared with Other Leaders**

In Ephesians 4:11, elders share the work of preparing the church for works of service and working towards the maturity of the church as a whole.

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13).

Further, some elders perform the work of teaching and preaching:

The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching (1 Timothy 5:17).

The point is that in one sense, all leaders in the church have the same general goal. Each individual role may have a unique focus, but the goal is creating maturity within the church.

## ***Older Men***

Older men in the church have a unique set of ministry needs and abilities. These are referred to in several passages:

Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father (1 Timothy 5:1).

Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance (Titus 2:2).

Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older (1 Peter 5:5).

Older men (and women!) do not have any special role by mere virtue of age, but they do have a certain status that demands special respect within the church. Elders obviously enjoy this same respect because of their age, and yet the role of the eldership consists of far more than this status.

## ***Oversight***

The verb cognate of *episkopos* is *episkopeo* and it relates the work of oversight to the elders of the church:

Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers (*episkopeo*)--not because you must, but because you are willing (1 Peter 5:2).

A synonymous term for the work of oversight is the Greek *proistemi*. Accordingly, "directing the affairs of the church" is a duty of some elders.

The elders who direct the affairs (*proistemi*) of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching (1 Timothy 5:17).

According to this passage, not all elders perform this work. In addition, some who are not elders also perform this work, as in the cases of unnamed leaders in the young church at Thessalonica who were charged with oversight of the church.

Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you (*proistemi*) in the Lord and who admonish you (1 Thessalonians 5:12).

Further, the gift of oversight is defined and authorized in Romans 12:8, and there is no evidence here of this gift being limited to the eldership.

...if it is leadership (*proistemi*), let him govern diligently (Romans 12:8)...

Even the entire church is charged with some degree of oversight:

See to it (*episkopo*) that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many (Hebrews 12:15).

Oversight appears to extend itself to the area of church finances:

The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul (Acts 11:29-30).

The point here is that in any church, there is a need for oversight, and the most qualified members of the church do this work. For Paul to refer to elders as overseers in 1 Timothy 3:1 suggests that this work is to be discharged by elders, for Peter to assign this work to shepherds in 1 Peter 5:2 says that same thing. Thus, it appears that when there is an eldership in place, some in the eldership perform the work of oversight, though possibly not in exclusion to others sharing in this work in accordance with their abilities.

### ***Difficult Doctrinal Situations***

One of the duties of the eldership is the resolution of difficult doctrinal situations. This is seen in Acts 15 in resolving the Gentile circumcision issue. From the text, we see that the apostles and elders arrived at their conclusions by a careful interpretation of Scripture, and then decided upon a course of action for the church based upon what the Scripture said. This is a case of leadership, not of revelatory doctrinal determination.

The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. When they finished, James spoke up: "Brothers, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

" `After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent.  
Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it,  
that the remnant of men may seek the Lord,  
and all the Gentiles who bear my name,  
says the Lord, who does these things'  
that have been known for ages.

"It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath (Acts 15:6-21)."

Paul saw the elders on Crete in this critical role as well:

He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it (Titus 1:9).

Of course, in "real life" difficult situations present themselves frequently, and they normally don't wait for an eldership to be in place before appearing! (Even the situation in Acts 15 originally occurred in Antioch, where no eldership was present.)

Evangelists commonly encountered difficult situations that they were to address in the same manner:

Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will (2 Timothy 2:23-26).

While elders are definitely to be involved in resolving these situations, it cannot be said that resolving difficult situations is the sole work of the eldership.

### ***In Accordance with Their Abilities***

Like other leaders, elders discharge their duties in accordance with their abilities. This is a guideline for all leaders in the church, as can be seen in the following passages:

We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership (*proistemi*), let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully (Romans 12:6-8).

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms (1 Peter 4:10).

If this applies to elders, then elders also serve in accordance with their gifts. As seen above, some elders direct the affairs of the church, and some teach and preach (1 Timothy 5:17). Therefore, some elders do NOT direct the affairs of the church, and some elders do NOT teach and preach. We should not think that all elders have the exact same skills, neither should we think that they all have the exact same role.

In Acts 15:22-23, we see the elders and apostles from Jerusalem authoring a letter to predominantly Gentile churches after considering the question of circumcision and the Gentiles converts. This is an example of an eldership exercising oversight beyond its own local congregation. This is in accordance with the need of the other churches and the relationship of the Jerusalem church to those other churches.

While the elders perform some of their work as a group, individual elders will exercise their unique ministry skills in accordance with their abilities. Along these same lines, the elders, like those whose work is teaching and preaching, may be "full-time" workers entitled to compensation (1 Timothy 5:17-18, 1 Peter 5:2). Not all elders need serve in this capacity.

### **Unique Duties Exclusive to the Eldership**

There are several passages that discuss specific tasks of the eldership. These indicate work that is done only by those in the eldership, and suggest that these are in fact the purpose of the eldership.

### ***Stewardship of the Church***

The elders are stewards of God's work. The Greek term used here is *oikonomos*, which is a steward or a house-master.

Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work (Titus 1:7).

This term is also applied to Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:1-2 and to all Christians in administering God's gifts faithfully in 1 Peter 4:10. The idea behind this term is that all Christians are stewards of things from God and should exercise that trust accordingly.

Yet, in applying this term to the eldership, there is a suggestion here that the eldership is God's ultimate plan for the care and custody of his church. God entrusts his church to the eldership, nowhere else is he said to entrust it to anyone else.

Accordingly, the parable of the servant put in charge of (Greek *kathistemi*) the master's house appears to specifically apply to the eldership.

Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, 'My master is staying away a long time,' and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 24:45-51).

### ***Shepherding***

John 21:15-17 contains an admonition to Peter (who later became an elder) to "feed" and "take care of" (Greek *poimaino*, tend like a shepherd) his sheep. During the church age, this work of shepherding is applied to elders, and elders only, in the New Testament.

Thus, shepherding is a unique work of the eldership.

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock (Acts 20:28-29).

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers--not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock (1 Peter 5:1-3).

In Acts 20:28, "keep watch" is the Greek *prosecho*, which means to be careful, watch out, pay attention, or be on one's guard. Two key passages discussing the concept of shepherding are Ezekiel 34 and John 10. These passages definitely have an application concerning the shepherding work performed by elders.

The word of the LORD came to me: "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep

wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.

"Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock, therefore, O shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them.

"For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice. (Ezekiel 34:1-16).

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep (John 10:11-13).

These passages clearly indicate the level of concern and involvement that God expects his shepherd to have for his flock, especially the weak, vulnerable and estranged of the flock. Jude discussed the "shepherds" of false religion in his day:

These men are blemishes at your love feasts, eating with you without the slightest qualm—shepherds who feed only themselves (Jude 1:12).

James 5:14 also indicates that the eldership has a specific ministry to the sick as well. This could be behind the idea of "taking care of" God's church in 1 Timothy 3:5, which uses the same term as the instruction to the innkeeper in the story of the Good Samaritan. This is not a separate ministry or duty but merely an extension of the shepherding of the flock.

## **The Appointment and Impeachment of the Eldership**

It is not known when or how the earliest elders were appointed. The first mention of elders in any congregation is in Jerusalem (Acts 11:30). Later remarks suggest that Peter and James may have filled these roles, but it cannot be said with any certainty that they were the first or only two elders of the Jerusalem church.

Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in the mission churches that they established. (Acts 14:23). Paul also instructed both Titus and Timothy in the appointment of elders (1 Timothy 3:1ff, Titus 1:5ff). These and the example from Acts 14 supports the idea that churches eventually "grew" their elderships from within as men became qualified for the position. The apparent lack of elderships in the young churches of Corinth, Thessalonica, Colosse and others lends support to this conclusion.

While there is no evidence of popular (democratic) election of elders in any of these cases, the qualifications of the eldership (to be discussed later) strongly suggest a more or less unanimous support of elders by the congregation in concert with existing leadership. Another way to view this is that there would be no significant or credible dissent from the positive opinion of the church.

The ultimate installation or appointment to the eldership appears to have been done by one in some other position of leadership, usually evangelists. This appointment appears to have been accompanied by a period of prayer and fasting (Acts 14:23). This may illustrate the basis of Paul's view that appointment to the office was something done by the Holy Spirit himself (Acts 20:28).

Thus, the selection of men for the eldership involves not only the work of the congregation and existing leaders, but it is also the work of God through the Holy Spirit.

### ***Impeachment of Elders***

There is no evidence of individual elders being impeached in the New Testament era. Yet, there appears to be a provision for such a possibility. Paul himself warned that false teachings and dissensions in the eldership were a possibility in Acts 20:30. In 1 Timothy 5:19-20, Timothy was told not to entertain accusations against an elder unless it was brought by a plurality of witnesses, and elders who were found to be in sin were to be rebuked publicly. It follows by implication that if any elder failed to respond appropriately to any accusation, removal from the eldership would have taken place. The same could probably be said for any elder who became disqualified for the role once having been installed in it.

### **Qualifications for the Eldership**

The qualifications for the eldership are enumerated in two particular places: 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. These should be viewed not as exhaustive lists any more than various "sin lists" (such as those in Galatians 5:19-21 or 2 Timothy 3:1-5) should be considered exhaustive lists of sin. In each of these cases, such lists serve to illustrate examples of the type of behavior under consideration. Accordingly, it is useful to

categorize these to consider what areas of life are under consideration. These criteria may be assigned to one of the following categories:

- Public and Spiritual Life
- Family Life
- Private Life

Each of these will be discussed as a group.

### ***Public and Spiritual Life***

For the candidate, there are fourteen criteria that relate to his public and spiritual life.

They are:

- Respectable (1 Timothy 3:2)
- Above Reproach (1 Timothy 3:2)
- Blameless (Titus 1:6,7)
  
- Good reputation with outsiders (1 Timothy 3:7)
- Not pursuing dishonest gain (Titus 1:7)
- Hospitable (1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:8)
  
- Not given to drunkenness (1 Timothy 3:3)
- Not violent but gentle (1 Timothy 3:3)
  
- Not quarrelsome (1 Timothy 3:3)
- Not overbearing (Titus 1:7, also see 1 Peter 5:3, not lording it over)
- Not quick-tempered (Titus 1:7)
  
- Not be a recent convert (1 Timothy 3:6)
  
- Hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught (Titus 1:9)
- Able to teach (1 Timothy 3:2)

The criteria addressing being respectable, above reproach and blameless are umbrella terms. These candidates must personify the highest ideals in living the life of a disciple. Accordingly, there would be no credible opposition to their serving in this role. Even to those outside of the church, there seems to be a sense that the candidate is completely worthy of respect.

Criteria such as good reputation with outsiders and not pursuing dishonest gain may relate to the way that a candidate does business and relates to those outside of the church.

Hospitality may relate to both general entertainment of other disciples (as in Romans 16:23, 1 Peter 4:9, Philemon 1:22) or strangers in need (as in Matthew 25:44-45, Hebrews 13:2, but also see 3 John 1:5). This trait also commends a transparency of lifestyle for the candidate.

The criteria discussing the absence of an overbearing, quarrelsome and quick-tempered disposition seem to address the candidate's ability to relate to people with gentleness and patience. These would especially be demonstrated during times of difficulty and duress.

The spiritual criteria are relatively self-explanatory. This candidate must be a solid disciple with a strong understanding of the doctrines of Christianity. He also must be competent to teach and persuade others, especially in the face of opposition, as the same term is used to encourage Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:24. (As was discussed previously, this type of teaching is in fact one of the works of the eldership.)

### ***Home and Family Life***

The candidate's home and family life comprises nine more characteristics.

- Husband of but one wife (1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:6)
- Wife: worthy of respect (1 Timothy 3:11)
- Wife: not malicious talker (1 Timothy 3:11)
- Wife: temperate (1 Timothy 3:11)
- Wife: trustworthy in everything (1 Timothy 3:11)
- Children: believe (Titus 1:6)
- Children: not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient (Titus 1:6)
- Children: obey him with proper respect (1 Timothy 3:4)
- Must manage his own family well (1 Timothy 3:4)

The candidate must be married to only one wife. This is relatively trivial in our day but has significance in view of polygamy and other different marriage customs.

The wife of the candidate is not herself a candidate for the office, but her characteristics may disqualify her husband for the role. Though stated briefly, it is evident that her character is to be on a par with that of her spouse.

The candidate's children are to be believers not open to the charges of wild and disobedient behavior. The terms for these sins show that these are not young children under consideration. Further, they are to obey the candidate with the proper respect.

Further, the candidate must have shown himself to have managed his family well. Thus, doing a good job of leading his family is a good indicator that the candidate can shepherd the church.

### ***Private Life***

Finally, there are eight criteria that apply to the individual character of the candidate. These would be known mostly by those closest to the candidate, and most certainly by God himself.

- Self-Controlled (Titus 1:8)
- Upright (Titus 1:8)
- Holy (Titus 1:8)
- Disciplined (Titus 1:8)
- Temperate (1 Timothy 3:2)
  
- Loves what is good (Titus 1:8)
- Not a lover of money (1 Timothy 3:3)
  
- Heart set upon being an overseer (1 Timothy 3:2)

These relate to the inner desires of the candidate. The candidate is one whose devotion to living a holy life commends him. Discipline and genuine devotion to God allow him to bear the fruits of the Spirit in his life.

The candidate loves what is good, without secret desires for money or worldliness. He is on the inside what he appears to be on the outside: the true desire of his heart is to serve God. And on top of all of that, the candidate truly desires the work of the eldership.

### **Conclusion**

In discussing the role of the eldership, we have seen that there is some overlap between the work of the eldership and other ministry leaders. Yet, we have also identified the critical areas of responsibility that are solely entrusted to elders, namely those of stewardship and shepherding. We have seen that there is room in the eldership for the exercise of a wide range of individual gifts and talents in the discharge of this service.

We have also discussed how elders might be selected. While there is no Biblical evidence of a popular (democratic) election, there is nonetheless a strong indication that the candidates commend themselves to all in the church (and even those outside of it) with their virtue. By this virtually unanimous support, they qualify themselves for the role.

When an eldership is formed, the church looks forward to the most perfect form of leadership that is possible, because God has entrusted the eldership with the noble task of performing God's work in the church.

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